

I am writing to you to share my comments as a scholar, writer, and teacher on the Indian history aspects of the new HSS draft. You will find along with this cover letter (in the same attachment): a) a statement about my approach and experiences teaching and writing about issues in postcolonial historiography and b) a detailed set of comments with several current scholarly references about the draft. I am presenting this 8000 word reading burden on you because I know how much you have worked on this issue already, and I hope my contribution here will give you added perspective on how vital this moment is for the future of education. It is my professional view that we are on the cusp of a paradigm shift in how Indian history and world history will be taught, and your board seems destined to play a key role in this process. After you read my statements, please do let me know if my expertise could be of further help to you, publicly or anonymously.

Sincerely

Vamsee Juluri



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October 5, 2015

Dr. Thomas Adams, Executive Director  
Instructional Quality Commission  
Curriculum Frameworks and Instructional Resources Division (CFIRD)  
California Department of Education  
1430 N Street, Room 3207 Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Dr. Adams,

I am a Professor of Media Studies and Asian Studies at the University of San Francisco and the author of several books and articles that examine representations of Hinduism and India in media and academic discourses. My books include *Becoming a Global Audience: Longing and Belonging in Indian Music Television* (Peter Lang, 2003), *The Mythologist: A Novel* (Penguin India, 2010), *Bollywood Nation: India through its Cinema* (Penguin India, 2013) and *Rearming Hinduism: Nature, Hinduphobia and the Return of Indian Intelligence* (Westland, 2015).

My writings have been published in scholarly and popular journals like *Foreign Affairs*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Peace Review*, *Communication Theory*, *Patheos*. I have been a columnist for *The Huffington Post*, *The Indian Express*, *The Daily O* and *The Hindu*. I have been invited to speak about Indian politics, history and culture on BBC's *The World*, Al Jazeera Television, PRI and KQED's *Forum* with Michael Krasny. I have nearly twenty years of teaching experience, and my teaching areas include Global Media and Culture, Media, Stereotyping and Violence, Media Audience Research, Indian Cinema, Gandhi in the Media, and Understanding India (a special course that includes a study abroad field trip component).

I am writing to you to share my comments as a scholar, writer, and teacher on the Indian history aspects of the new HSS draft. You will find along with this cover letter: a) a statement about my approach and experiences teaching and writing about issues in postcolonial historiography and b) a detailed set of comments (with several scholarly references) about the draft. I am presenting this 8000 word reading burden on you because I know how much you have worked on this issue already, and I hope my contribution here will give you added perspective on how vital this moment is for the future of education. It is my professional view that we are on the cusp of a paradigm shift in how Indian history and world history will be taught, and your board seems destined to play a key role in this process. After you read my statements, please do let me know if my expertise could be of further help to you, publicly or anonymously.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vamsee Juluri'.

Vamsee Juluri

## Statement on Teaching Approaches and Experiences

### Vamsee Juluri

I wish to explain a little more about my training, experience and approach to history, given that my engagement with it is interdisciplinary (which is one reason perhaps I have been able to see these often tense Indian history debates in California and in India with new eyes, and with a global view sympathetic to both academia's concern for intellectual rigor and the community's concerns about fair treatment of Hinduism).

I did my Ph.D. in Communication from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 1999 with a specialization in critical cultural studies and postcolonial studies, audience research, and globalization studies. From the time of my graduate studies, I have been deeply engaged with debates on popular and academic historiography, and with the question of how history is narrated in classroom and in the more informal space of media and popular culture. For example, in my Global Media and Culture seminar, which I have been teaching at USF for close to 15 years, we analyze closely how world history is narrated today, and move from there to discussions of topics in contemporary global culture such as representations of diversity and otherness, migration, terrorism and the “clash of civilizations” idea. Our seminars are informed by the work of scholars such as Edward Said, Samir Amin, Howard Zinn, Tzvetan Todorov, Mahatma Gandhi and others. I am therefore deeply aware of colonial and postcolonial dilemmas in historiography, and the ongoing struggle by historians and educators to broaden the teaching of history to become more inclusive and truly reflective of global diversity.

One good thing I find is that students these days are very aware of some of these concerns by the time they come to college, which means that the California standards have been effective in some areas of world history, such as the colonial encounter with Native America. Unfortunately, Indian history is a different matter. All students seem to have learned about India in school in the following: ancient India had an Aryan Invasion and a caste system, then fast forward to Akbar and the Mughals, and then Gandhi. The profoundly deep and interconnected ways in which Indian thought, mathematics, science and culture, not to mention trade and commerce, have been fundamental to the rise of the modern world-system are barely taught in schools today (Andre Gunder Frank's essay India in the World Economy is a classic resource on this). It is only at the senior year college level that students get to appreciate that world history cannot be understood accurately without India's place in it (after all, both Columbus and Vasco da Gama set out on that “prize,” didn't they, leading to the global economy, for good and for bad, that we have today). This, naturally, is a disservice not only to Indian Americans, but to everyone else who has to be knowledgeable about India as it quickly rises to global economic and cultural prominence again in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I don't understand the reason for this complete absence of even basic historical training at the school level about India's place in world history. Whether it's a consolation, or a cause of more sorrow, this problem is not peculiar to California. There is a problem, more

broadly, in the “India story” in academia and media which is completely at odds with the growing economic relevance of India today in the global digital economy and with the rise of its “soft power” through its diaspora, yoga, and of course, Bollywood. Indian-Americans are a successful community, well-settled in American life and creating companies and jobs, building bridges with new and old country through culture and business, and yet we have only recently woken up with a start to realize that we don’t own our history; in California, and *even in India*, for 68 years after independence, we were still being taught a repackaged version of “scholarship” that was current in, say, the 1890s!

This was the dilemma that inspired my most recent book, *Rearming Hinduism* (please excuse the seemingly militant title, it refers to the cover image of a fantastic sculpture of a lion-god whose right arm is missing, broken during the sacking of the magnificent Vijayanagara empire capital of Hampi in 1565). In this book, which is partly a critique of dominant paradigms in South Asian historiography, and partly a contemporary manifesto for modern Hinduism to view the present and future in an environmentally and socially grounded ethic, I lay out the problems with how academia and the Hindu community have failed to engage positively with each other, and how we can move forward. The California textbooks issue does find mention in it briefly; the contentious 2006 debates that I followed closely in the press were partly an inspiration for the book. In these nine years, I have examined the evidence on all sides closely, and my conclusion is basically this: what we are living through is essentially a paradigm shift in academia.

As I discuss in Chapter 1 of my book, one reason that this moment exploded rather suddenly in recent years was the fact that unlike African American studies, Chicano/a studies, Women’s studies and other fields which emerged in opposition to older Eurocentric paradigms in academia, the study of Hinduism (and India to an extent) did not go through such a period of decolonization. This was for two reasons: 1) when the academic upheavals took place in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s the Indian American community was hardly a presence in colleges unlike other minorities, since this was very soon after the 1965 immigration act that permitted Indian migration and 2) the scholars from India who did enter U.S. academia in social sciences were mostly trained in what was the dominant paradigm in Indian social science then, a Nehruvian-era secular-Marxist approach. The Marxist approach was very effective in giving a voice to Indian minorities (“subalterns”) in India and abroad, but it did not pay any attention to the need to decolonize the very important category of Hindu identity from the way it had been constructed by Eurocentric scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, this old, pseudo-scientific, and often racist “knowledge” about India became deeply entwined in current academic paradigms like postcolonial theory and South Asia studies broadly. At its core, it believes in denying the majority of people in India a sense of belonging with their own land, sacred flora and fauna, customs and tradition. It argues, in essence, that Hindus are invaders and occupiers of their own country! Worse, some scholars draw odious comparison between Hindus and Nazi Germany, even (see my discussion of Wendy Doniger’s *The Hindus: An Alternative History* in my book).

It might seem hard to believe that distinguished academicians make such claims, but this is the strange truth of academia, and of academia on the cusp of a paradigm shift. The energy for this shift is coming from the community, from Hindu American children and their parents. They may not be trained in the social sciences, but they are well-educated professionals, many of them engineers, doctors and scientists, and they are figuring out very quickly what the problem is. In academia too, there is a slow but tangible acknowledgment of the need for introspection (please see my recent letter and counter-petition published on [Academe](#)). The issue is not simply one of “progressive academicians representing liberal Hindus” versus “right-wing Hindu fanatics seeking to whitewash history lessons and oppress minorities in India,” as it was made out to be by the press in 2006. The academic paradigm shift that is beginning now is related to a much bigger sense of civilizational rediscovery in India and the diaspora. (Please see my short [article](#) on this issue in the journal *Foreign Affairs* when you get a chance). It is a generational change at its core. Most Hindu parents today grew up when India was a socialist post-colony not yet prepared to challenge the effects of cultural colonization by British rule; when I was in school in India in the 1970s for example, we learned very little about the richness of Hindu thought, art, architecture, cosmology (the work of ancient Indian astronomers and mathematicians like Aryabhatta), bio-philosophies (Ayurveda and Yoga), statecraft, and ethics. What little we knew about our past, we picked up from family and movies. Our history curriculum in India to made us feel bad about who we were-- just like the California textbooks--but not any longer, hopefully!

I have reviewed the new draft, and also some suggestions that have probably already come to you from some of the well-informed leaders of the community who have been active in this process. I believe that the new draft you have is largely positive and a step in the right direction. The dropping of the ridiculous word “Aryan” is a good step; no one in India has called themselves one in millennia, nor do we know for sure if this was indeed a fundamental category of identity even in the ancient world! It is a remnant of twisted racial thinking, when colonial ideologies of race supremacy, social Darwinism, and “civilizing missions” dominated social thought. However, there are still a few concerns I wish to bring to your attention, so that the lessons reflect the best of current thinking, and also stay on course with where the paradigm is beginning to head towards now.

Comments on HSS September 2015 Draft  
Vamsee Juluri  
Professor of Media Studies and Asian Studies  
University of San Francisco

### 1) Environment and History (lines 781-796)

I don't have any concerns about this section as such, but I have been writing about this issue more generally and would like to share some ideas as it's more of a deeper issue with how European and non-European civilizations are studied.

What I have noticed is that lessons on Judeo-Christian history tend to situate human agency explicitly (through a discussion of the religious worldview of the era, its philosophy, and such, and how it inspired its members to build their civilizations), while lessons on India, China and elsewhere tend to present the civilization as a mere by-product of the environment (rivers, soil, monsoons etc.).

At the moment, we don't know too much about worldview of the Harappans, except the important resemblances to Hinduism such as the meditation Shiva-like seal, the Namaste gesture, and such. For now, this approach might be okay, but in the future it would be better if China, India and other civilizations too had an agential account (rooted in a culture's sense of itself) rather than an objectified one.

I have written about this issue in my book and elsewhere. One direction might come from the new research being done in animal studies, ethics, and cultural studies about the history of human understanding and engagement with nature generally, and animals in particular. You may find my article on the Bill Gates- supported Big History project useful on this point.

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/vamsee-juluri/why-we-fail-to-see-life-as-life-sees-itself\\_b\\_5801984.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/vamsee-juluri/why-we-fail-to-see-life-as-life-sees-itself_b_5801984.html)

## 2) “Indian history entered the Vedic age” (lines 810-821)

### Present draft:

Indian history then entered the Vedic period (ca. 1500-500 BCE), an era named for the Vedas, Sanskrit religious texts passed on for generations through a complex oral tradition. In that period, people speaking Indic languages, which are part of the larger Indo-European family of languages, entered South Asia, probably by way of Iran. Gradually, Indic languages, including Sanskrit, spread across northern India. They included the ancestors of such modern languages as Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali. The early Indic speakers were most likely animal herders. They may have arrived in India in scattered bands, later intermarrying with populations perhaps ancestral to those who speak Dravidian languages, such as Tamil and Telugu (SIC.) in southern India and Sri Lanka today. In the same era, nomads who spoke Indo-Iranian languages moved into Persia. Indic, Iranian, and most European languages are related.

### Comments:

The new draft, if I may be frank, simply continues to waste valuable learning space here. The word “Aryan” has been rightly dropped, but the flawed “Aryan invasion” narrative is still very much intact. This is harmful for two reasons; first, it perpetuates the denial of Hinduism’s indigenousness and deep attachment to the sacred geography of India (please see Diana Eck’s *India: A Sacred Geography*, and also Chapter 3 “The Myth of Aryan Origins” in my book for its critique of pre-modern “colonization” narratives), and second, it objectifies the Vedic people as mere “animal herders” without engaging even a little bit with the Vedic worldview and culture, which is very much open knowledge since many of the texts continue to be chanted, experienced, and studied to this day.

For evidence of challenges to the “Aryan (or any other)” invasion/migration idea, there are several useful sources. Trautman’s *The Aryan Debates* is a good overview from a few years ago, but does not address several new arguments currently being discussed in Indian history circles. However, scholars such as Klaus Klostermaier on the other hand have accepted as early as two decades ago that “the certainty seems to be growing that the Indus civilization was carried by the Vedic Indians, who were not invaders from Southern Russia but indigenous for an unknown period of time in the Central Himalayan regions” (p. 38). It might not be very long before this becomes the mainstream view in academia, given the increasing amount of evidence based on genetics, archaeology, archaeo-astronomy and other fields. My view is that this has been largely delayed so far only because of needless political struggles about secularism and Hindu nationalism back in India.

Regarding the Vedic cultural worldview, this too is an ongoing intellectual debate, since there are vast differences in how the same words in the Vedic texts are interpreted differently in Hindu philosophical and theological traditions, and in Western philology and academic circles. For example, the dominant academic view of scholars like D.N. Jha believes that the Vedic texts show evidence of beef-eating by the Vedic people, while traditional Sanskrit scholars in India argue otherwise. The Italian scholar and Indologist Roberto Calasso, on the other hand, offers an interesting interpretation: he views the

Vedic hymns about cows as suggesting a deep ethical, emotional, and metaphysical struggle in the Vedic people about the question of taking a life to survive, and that of a bovine in particular. He views the Vedic culture as marking the period of early human history when humans began to turn from being prey to large animals to becoming hunters themselves (which probably situates the earliest verses even further back in time). His humble introduction to the Vedic era may be useful for us here, since so little is known: “They were remote beings... We cannot be sure where they lived. When: more than three thousand years ago, though dates vary considerably between one scholar and the other. Area: the north of the Indian subcontinent, but with no exact boundaries” (p. 3).

I would like to offer the following lines instead by way of an alternative. I think its important that once the dubious notion of an Aryan invasion has been rejected, we must also move away from this sort of “invasion narrative” of people and languages “penetrating” and “colonizing” different parts of India, and offer some facts which are meaningful to students, and draw a connection between past and present in an engaging manner.

#### Suggested Text:

**The decline of the Harappan cities coincides with the rise of what is called the Vedic period in Indian history. This period is named for the Vedas, ancient texts in the Sanskrit language. There are four Vedas, and the oldest, the Rig Veda, contains about 10,000 verses. The Vedas were passed on through oral tradition. Many verses from them continue to be chanted in Hindu religious ceremonies to this day, such as the Gayatri Mantra, which expresses a desire for intelligence. The Vedas reflect the close relationship that existed between the Vedic people and nature, and suggest that the cow was an important part of their economy and culture. There has been considerable debate among historians about the origins of the Vedic people and the time of composition of the Vedas. There is however increasing agreement that by sometime between 2500-1500 BCE, the location of the Vedic people can be precisely identified as the northern part of the Indian subcontinent.**

#### References:

Diana Eck. (2012). *India: A Sacred Geography*. New York: Harmony.  
Klaus Klostermaier. (1994). *A Survey of Hinduism*. Albany: SUNY.  
Roberto Calasso. (2013). *Ardor*. New York: Penguin/Allen Lane.  
Thomas Trautmann (2005). *The Aryan Debates*. New Delhi: OUP.  
I also highly recommend:  
Sanjeev Sanyal (2012). *Land of the Seven Rivers: A Brief History of India's Geography*. New Delhi: Penguin India. Sanyal logically presents genetic and archaeological discoveries and lays to rest whatever credence one might still want to give to the Aryan Invasion Theory. There is also an easy to read Young Adult version of the book that could be a model for the lesson plans here. (*The Incredible History of India's Geography*, Puffin Books)

### 3. “Later Vedic Period” (lines 820-887)

#### Present Draft:

Later in the Vedic period, new commercial towns arose along the Ganges, India’s second great river system. In this era, Vedic culture (or Brahmanism in the existing standards) emerged as a belief system that combined the beliefs of Indic speakers with those of older populations.

Teachers focus students on the question: **How did the religion of Hinduism support individuals, rulers, and societies?** Brahmins, that is, priestly families, assumed authority over complex devotional rituals, but many important sages, such as Valmiki and Vyasa, were not brahmins. The brahmin class expounded the idea of the oneness of all living things and of Brahman as the divine principle of being. The Hindu tradition is thus monistic, the idea of reality being a unitary whole. Brahman may be manifested in many ways, including incarnation in the form of deities, including Vishnu, preserver of the world, and Shiva, creator and destroyer of the world. These gods could be seen as aspects of Brahman, an all-pervading divine, supreme reality. Vedic teachings gradually built up a rich body of spiritual and moral teachings that formed the foundation of Hinduism as it is practiced today. These teachings were transmitted orally at first, and then later in written texts, the Upanishads and, later, the Bhagavad Gita. Performance of duties and ceremonies became one dimension of the supreme quest to achieve oneness with divine reality. That fulfillment, however, demands obedience to the moral law of the universe, called dharma, which also refers to performance of social duties. Success or failure at existing in harmony with dharma determines how many times an individual might be subject to reincarnation, or repeated death and rebirth at either lower or higher positions of moral and ritual purity. Progress toward spiritual realization is governed by karma, the principle that right deeds done in one lifetime condition an individual’s place in the next one. Many of the central practices of Hinduism today, including home and temple worship, yoga and meditation, rites of passage (samskaras), festivals, pilgrimage, respect for saints and gurus, and, above all, a profound acceptance of religious diversity, developed over this period.

#### Comments:

There are some errors, contradictions, and misplaced priorities in this section.

*In this era, Vedic culture (or Brahmanism in the existing standards) emerged as a belief system that combined the beliefs of Indic speakers with those of older populations.*

This sentence once again reproduces the “invasion narrative” with all its racial undertones implied by Vedic culture as a newer population combining with “older populations.” Sanjeev Sanyal quotes several studies of genetic ancestry from *Nature* in his book to argue that the Vedic people (or “Indic speakers” as they are called here) do not constitute a separate race from people in India.

Also, “belief system” is also a projection of Western categories of “religion.” The principal texts of the later Vedic age were the Upanishads, which were more about philosophy rather than about belief in a God or myth as such.

*How did the religion of Hinduism support individuals, rulers and societies?*

If the central question here is “How did the religion of Hinduism support individuals, rulers and societies?” it would be more accurate to center the “religion of Hinduism,” i.e. its philosophical worldview, at the outset, and then proceed to a discussion of classes and castes along with other issues.

In its present form, the narrative also suffers from some of the old colonial-era biases in parts. Specifically, these are some of the lines that could be presented in a better manner:

*How did the religion of Hinduism support individuals, rulers, and societies? Brahmins, that is, priestly families, assumed authority over complex devotional rituals, but many important sages, such as Valmiki and Vyasa, were not brahmins. The brahmin class expounded the idea of the oneness of all living things and of Brahman as the divine principle of being.*

-the two lines immediately after ‘How did the religion of Hinduism support individual rulers etc’ perpetuate the myth of Hinduism as the creation of a rigid, monolithic priestly Brahmin caste that excluded the rest of the population (though it does acknowledge that non-Brahmins by birth like Vyasa and Valmiki were accorded the same status). By stating that the “Brahmin class expounded the idea of the oneness of all living beings” it implies that this belief was not shared by the rest of India’s population at that time. As Nanditha Krishnan’s important studies *Sacred Animals of India* and *Sacred Plants of India* show, reverence of living beings was a widespread sensibility in India common to Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Adivasis (forest dwellers), and cannot be reduced any one class.

- “Brahminism”: this is a British colonial-era racial construct and inaccurate. Needs to be dropped. It imposes modern Western ideas of authorship on cultures that viewed knowledge in vastly different ways. See my note later on Adluri & Bagchee’s important new study of 19<sup>th</sup> century German Indology and how it inappropriately projected Western-Christian notions of religious history onto India.

*The Hindu tradition is thus monistic, the idea of reality being a unitary whole. Brahman may be manifested in many ways, including incarnation in the form of deities, including Vishnu, preserver of the world, and Shiva, creator and destroyer of the world.*

-“Brahma” is missing here; when the “trinity” is mentioned it should be Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, who stands for dissolution (“destructive” is often used too but it is an imprecise translation in my view and lends itself to negative connotations)

- also, the word “incarnation” is used a bit awkwardly here. It corresponds to the Sanskrit word “avatar.” Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma are not “avatars” – they are better described as “forms of Brahman,” or just “deities.” “Avatar”/incarnation is used to describe human forms of these deities; for example, Rama is an avatar of Vishnu.

*Performance of duties and ceremonies became one dimension of the supreme quest to achieve oneness with divine reality. That fulfillment, however, demands obedience to the moral law of the universe, called dharma, which also refers to performance of social duties.*

-“demands obedience” and “moral law” seem like an imposition of Judeo-Christian terms on Dharmic sensibilities here. In fact the whole tone of this verse sounds rather ominous and dictatorial. Phrases like “harmony with nature” are closer in spirit.

Suggested Draft:

**Teachers focus students on the question: How did the religion of Hinduism support individuals, rulers, and societies in the later Vedic period? The principal texts of the later Vedic Age are known as the Upanishads and contain philosophical dialogues about the nature of the self, reality, life and death. At the center of the Upanishadic worldview is the notion of the Brahman, or the divine principle of being. Some Upanishads contain simple, practical conversations between teachers and students aimed at demonstrating the oneness of all things, and the oneness of all living beings in particular. This abstract, or formless, notion of God complemented a growing and diverse pantheon of gods and goddesses, a reflection of the political and cultural diversity of the late Vedic culture as it spanned across the Ganges river valley in Northern India. The complex Hindu pantheon may be understood in terms of three broad levels. At the most abstract level, Hinduism is what modern scholars might call “monistic,” rooted in the idea of reality as a unitary whole. At another level, Hinduism approaches the divine in the forms of various gods, such as Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the god of dissolution, and goddesses such as Saraswathi, the Goddess of Learning and Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. At still another level, Hindus also worship beings like Krishna and Rama as “avatars” or human incarnations of Vishnu. Many present-day Hindu practices also began at this time such as temple worship, yoga, meditation, inquiry, rites of passage (samskaras), festivals, pilgrimages, respect for saints and gurus, and above all a profound acceptance of religious diversity. The goal of these practices is moksha, or liberation from the bondage of ignorance that causes the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The path to moksha is often discussed using two important terms, dharma and karma. Dharma may be understood simply as duty, often with connotations of duty that conforms the order of nature. Karma refers to actions, and specifically the good or bad debts that an individual accrues with actions, which affect one’s future life or lives. Dharma in ancient India was also closely connected to notions of social order, such as *varna-ashrama*, the four-functions of society, and the four stages of each individual’s life. Ancient Indian kingship was closely connected with ideals of dharma. Teachers may use a mnemonic device from the Upanishads (later popularized by T.S. Eliot in The Waste Land) to give an example of how the**

Upanishads view dharma for different groups of people: “What the Thunder Said,” or “Da-Da-Da.” In the story, three groups of beings with different tendencies (cruelty, greed, and gluttony) ask the creator how they can be happy. The answer given is “da” (what thunder sounds like): the greedy understand it as “datta” which means “to give,” the cruel understand it as “dayadhvam, which means “be kind,” and the gluttonous take it as “damyata,” which means “control your cravings.”

References:

(definitions of dharma, karma, Brahman etc.)

Anna Dallapicolla (2002). *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Chaturvedi Badrinath (2006). *The Mahabharatha: An Inquiry in the Human Condition*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.

Swami Prabhavananda & Frederick Manchester (translators)(1957) *The Upanishads*. L.A.: Vedanta Society.

#### 4. “Caste” and Women

##### Present Draft (lines 850-887):

*As in all early civilizations, Indian society witnessed the development of a system of social classes. Ancient Indian society formed into self-governing groups, jatis, that emphasized birth as the defining criteria. Jatis initially shared the same occupation and married only within the group. This system, often termed caste, provided social stability and gave an identity to each community. The Vedas also describe four main social categories, known as varnas, namely: Brahmins (priests); Kshatriyas (kings and warriors); Vaishyas (merchants, artisans, and farmers) and Sudras (peasants and laborers). A person belonged to a particular varna by his professional excellence and his good conduct, not by birth itself. In addition, by 500 CE or earlier, there existed certain communities outside this system, the “Untouchables,” who did the most unclean work, such as cremation, disposal of dead animals, and sanitation.*

*Relations between classes came to be expressed in terms of ritual purity or impurity, higher classes being purer than lower ones. This class system became distinctive over the centuries for being especially complex and formal, involving numerous customs and prohibitions on eating together and intermarrying that kept social and occupational groups distinct from one another in daily life. Over the centuries, the Indian social structure became more rigid, though perhaps not more inflexible than the class divisions in other ancient civilizations. When Europeans began to visit India in modern times, they used the word “caste” to characterize the social system because of the sharp separation they perceived between groups who did not intermarry and thus did not mix with each other. Caste, however, is a term that social scientists use to describe any particularly unbending social structure, for example, slave-holding society in the American south before the Civil War, which can make the “caste” label offensive. Today many Hindus, in India and in the United States, do not identify themselves as belonging to a caste. Teachers should make clear to students that this was a social and cultural structure rather than a religious belief. As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, priests, rulers, and other elites used religion to justify the social hierarchy. The teacher has students draw a social hierarchy pyramid of the varnas and compare that pyramid with the Mesopotamian social hierarchy pyramid they made earlier. In both cases, rulers, political elites (warriors and officials) and priests were on the top of the social hierarchy. This was a common pattern of premodern societies. Although ancient India was a patriarchy, women had a right to their personal wealth, especially jewelry, gold, and silver, but fewer property rights than men. They participated equally with their husbands in religious ceremonies and festival celebrations. Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshipped in female as well as male form.*

##### Comments:

*Ancient Indian society formed into self-governing groups, jatis, that emphasized birth as the defining criteria. Jatis initially shared the same occupation and married only within the group. This system, often termed caste, provided social stability and gave an identity to each community. The Vedas also describe four main social categories, known as varnas, namely: Brahmins (priests); Kshatriyas (kings and warriors); Vaishyas (merchants, artisans, and farmers) and Sudras (peasants and laborers). A person belonged to a particular varna by his professional excellence and his good conduct, not by birth itself.*

-The section above needs to be slightly rearranged. It is chronologically mixed up, and by leading with “birth as the defining criteria” it perpetuates the colonial essentialist idea of caste rather than the Indian sense. It should begin with Vedas and Varnas, and emphasize the statement about a person belonging to it by profession etc. and not by birth. The rise of jati as birth-based community should come after this point is based. (A verse from Rig

Veda, Book 9, is seen by scholars as a sign of the mobility of caste identities in Vedic times: “I am a bard, my father is a physician, my mother is a grinder of corn...”)

*Relations between classes came to be expressed in terms of ritual purity or impurity, higher classes being purer than lower ones.*

-This statement is highly debatable, and would need to be situated very carefully in terms of exactly when (it seems to bring in ideas from texts much later than the Later Vedic/Upanishadic age, for one thing) and also in the context of various Central Asian tribal invasions that brought in ideas of “barbarians” into Indian culture. If it’s used, it would also need to be qualified with a recognition of how each class had to follow its own strict behavioral laws about ritual purity, with the Brahmins living with the greatest restrictions on their own conduct and pursuit of pleasure. On the whole, I feel this comment is likely to be viewed as “adverse reflection,” so I suggest dropping it.

*Over the centuries, the Indian social structure became more rigid, though perhaps not more inflexible than the class divisions in other ancient civilizations. When Europeans began to visit India in modern times, they used the word “caste” to characterize the social system because of the sharp separation they perceived between groups who did not intermarry and thus did not mix with each other.*

-it might be more accurate to add some context to the first line here: “Over the centuries, as invasions from Central and later Western Asia increased, Indian social structure became more rigid.” Alternatively, this could be dropped.

-“When Europeans began to visit India in modern times...” – we are not living in the 1950s anymore, dear colleagues! This has to be clearly stated as the colonial encounter between the Portuguese and India starting in 1493. The word “caste” comes from the Portuguese. Alternate statement given below. (See K.M. Panikkar on the Portuguese invasion of India, and Nicholas Dirks on the modern-colonial era “invention” of caste).

*Today many Hindus, in India and in the United States, do not identify themselves as belonging to a caste.*

-good point, but unfairly singles out Hindus for caste, when caste identity in India exists among Christians and Muslims too. A more accurate statement would be: “Today many Indians, in India and in the United States, do not identify themselves as belonging to a caste, nor do those who identify with their castes necessarily hold supremacist views or practice discrimination against others as Indian law strictly forbids such practices.

*Teachers should make clear to students that this was a social and cultural structure rather than a religious belief. As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, priests, rulers, and other elites used religion to justify the social hierarchy. The teacher has students draw a social hierarchy pyramid of the varnas and compare that pyramid with the Mesopotamian social hierarchy pyramid they made earlier. In both cases, rulers, political elites*

*(warriors and officials) and priests were on the top of the social hierarchy. This was a common pattern of premodern societies.*

-I find this suggested exercise profoundly offensive and a potential emotional disaster in the classroom for several reasons. First, it is an adverse reflection, singling out Hindus, considering the other comparisons here are dead civilizations (Egypt and Mesopotamia). Since none of us want to embarrass Jewish, Christian, or Muslim students with comparative exercises on how their “religion was used to justify hierarchy (or patriarchy, mass violence etc), let us just drop this.

*Although ancient India was a patriarchy, women had a right to their personal wealth, especially jewelry, gold, and silver, but fewer property rights than men. They participated equally with their husbands in religious ceremonies and festival celebrations. Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshipped in female as well as male form.*

-Start with the positive, and then go to the criticism of patriarchy. See my suggestion below.

-Suggested Draft:

**As in all early civilizations, Indian society witnessed the development of a system of social classes. In the early Vedic age, the main system of social classification was a functionalist one known as varnas. Four varnas are mentioned in the Vedas: Brahmins (priests, poets and philosophers); Kshatriyas (kings and warriors); Vaishyas (merchants, artisans, and farmers) and Sudras (peasants and laborers). The Vedas also indicate flexibility and mobility across the varna system. A person belonged to a particular varna by his professional excellence and his good conduct, not by birth itself (for example, sages like Vyasa and Valmiki were accorded the status of Brahmins but were of non-Brahmin birth). The growth and spread of Vedic society later led to its organization into a large number of self-governing groups or jatis. Membership in a jati was usually determined by birth, and regulated by rules against intermarriage. Jatis provided identity, social stability, and preserved the intergenerational transmission of skills and knowledge. Individuals could not move across jatis easily, but a jati, as a whole could work its way up the varna hierarchy (a practice that occurs to this day in India through democratic means). However, jati could also be rigid, and hierarchical, like any class system in the ancient world, and particularly oppressive for some jatis deemed to be outside the four varna system for doing unclean tasks such as cremation and sanitation (“untouchables”). Teachers should emphasize the following points. The word “caste” is not an Indian concept, though it is widely used, often inaccurately and presumptively, while talking about India and Hinduism. The word “caste,” is of Portuguese origin and came to be used widely by early European colonizers to try and make sense of the complexities of Indian society. It is also used widely by social scientists use to describe any particularly unbending social structure. Today many Indians, in India and in the United States, do not identify themselves as belonging to a caste, nor do those who identify with their jatis necessarily hold supremacist views or practice discrimination against others as Indian law strictly forbids such practices. Teachers should also make clear to students that this was a social and**

cultural structure rather than a religious belief, and also add that modern Indian law prohibits caste discrimination and supports extensive affirmative affirmation.

Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshipped in female and male forms. The deities for learning, wealth, and divine energy (Saraswathi, Lakshmi, and Durga) are female and have several festivals and ceremonies dedicated to them. In the Vedic age, women were also scholars and philosophers. Several verses in the Vedas were composed by women. Women had a right to their personal wealth like gold and jewelry and could participate equally in religious ceremonies and festivals. But ancient India was still a patriarchy, and men often had more privileges than women.

#### References:

K. M. Panikkar (1959). *Asia and Western Dominance*. NY: Collier.

Nicholas Dirks (2001). *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton U.

#### 5. Ramayana

### Present Draft (lines 888-898):

One text Hindus rely on for solutions to moral dilemmas is the *Ramayana*, the story of Rama, an incarnation or avatar of Vishnu, who goes through many struggles and adventures as he is exiled from his father's kingdom and has to fight a demonic enemy, Ravana. Rama, his wife Sita, and some other characters always make the correct moral decisions in this epic work. The teacher might select the scene in which Rama accepts his exile, or the crisis over the broken promise of Sugriva, the monkey king, and then ask students: **What is the moral dilemma here? What is the character's dharma?** In this way, students can deepen their understanding of Hinduism as they are immersed in one of ancient India's most important literary and religious texts.

### Comments:

-This is a good point and example, but could be presented in a much richer way. In the present form, there are two problems. One, it misses a chance to mention the *Mahabharatha*, which is also very popular in India and a moral touchstone for everyday life (The *Bhagavad Gita* is a part of the *Mahabharatha*). That also allows a chance to mention the other major protagonist/avatar, Krishna. Two, the statement "characters always make the correct moral decisions" imposes a canonical reading which is at odds with the very diverse, plural, and complex ways in which the *Ramayana* (and the *Mahabharatha*) are depicted in Indian classical arts and popular culture, and the ways in which Hindus make sense of them (The essay "300 Ramayanas" by A.K. Ramanujan is a classic in academic circles). Also, I am not sure what the "broken promise of Sugriva" is really! Better to use the most famous examples instead.

### Suggested Draft:

**When in search of guidance for moral dilemmas, Hindus often refer to ideals from two epic poems, The Ramayana and The Mahabharatha. There are several hundred versions of these epics that have been created in several Indian languages over the centuries, and there are several modern versions available in the form of movies, TV shows, and comic books as well. At their core, both epics tell the story of how one can recognize and practice dharma, the right way to conduct one's self, in the face of injustice, loss, and suffering. In the Mahabharatha, five princes are cheated of their rightful inheritance by their cruel cousins and exiled. Krishna, who is also a popular deity, is the main character in this epic, and he guides the good princes on their dharma in winning back their kingdom (the famous poem The Bhagavad Gita, which influenced several great thinkers like Thoreau, Emerson and Gandhi, appears in this book). In the Ramayana, the good prince Rama is exiled from his home by his step-mother, and while in exile, finds his wife Sita kidnapped by the arrogant King Ravana. Hindus draw several moral lessons from the Ramayana; such as the respect Rama has for his parents in accepting exile and hardship, the courage Sita has in following Rama into exile, and the selfless and appropriate conduct of Hanuman who helps Rama find Sita. Teachers could screen one of several easily available versions of these epics (such as Peter Brooks' play The Mahabharatha or the Indian-Japanese animated Ramayana) and encourage students to identify the points in the narrative where characters had to make difficult moral choices."**

## 6. From 7<sup>th</sup> grade standards: Bhakti Movement

### Present Draft: (Lines 671-758)

Building on their previous study of Hinduism in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, students study the question: **How did Hinduism change over time?** Hinduism continued to evolve with the Bhakti movement, which emphasized personal expression of devotion to God, who had three aspects: Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the keeper, and Siva, the destroyer. The Bhakti movement placed emphasis on social and religious equality and a personal expression of devotion to God in the popular, vernacular languages. People of all social groups now had personal access to their own personal deities, whom they could worship with songs, dances, processions, and temple visits. Bhakti grew more popular, thanks to the saints such as Meera Bai and Ramananda. Even though India was not unified into one state, nor did its people belong to a single religion, the entire area was developing a cultural unity.

### Comments:

I commend the inclusion of the important topic of Bhakti in the lessons. However, in the present form, the narrative is not neutral and introduces subtle biases and value judgments (as well as implicit Judeo-Christian ideas like a “personal God”). Consider the following statements: “Hinduism *continued to evolve*,” “People of all social groups *now* had personal access...” These comments, especially when read with the Sixth Grade Ancient India draft as it stands with its inaccurate focus on “Brahminism,” reproduces what has been a pervasive “civilizing narrative” on Indian history (ancient Hinduism was nothing more than hierarchy among animal herders; medieval Hinduism was more egalitarian etc.).

The sources of this projection of Eurocentric historiography lie in 19<sup>th</sup> century German Indology and have been extensively documented and critiqued in *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology*, a masterful study by Adluri and Bagchee (2014). Adluri and Bagchee argue that these early colonial era German scholars projected the framework of Western/Christian history onto their accounts of Indian religious history, and this is the same framework that dominates most accounts, including the one we see in the draft. Specifically, Adluri and Bagchee point out the following comparisons: Vedic Hinduism is reduced to a “priestly” ideology and presented on par with Roman Catholicism, and Buddhism and later developments presented as some kind of Protestant “reformation” in India. The truth is far more complex. (Adluri and Bagchee’s points are also relevant to the lines about Buddhism and Jainism; important not to present these as mere “improvement” on Hinduism).

The last line about India not really being a political unity is highly problematic. The Mauryan empire pretty much spanned from what is now Afghanistan till close to Southern India. The comment about “not belonging to a single religion” is also highly arguable. It reproduces a typical postmodern argument prevalent in some quarters these days that holds that there never really was a religion like Hinduism (a position that never accounts for its contradictory views on caste and Hinduism and caste though). Diana Eck’s *India: A Sacred Geography* shows that the landscape of India, from Kashmir to the Indian Ocean was fairly “unified” through a network of pilgrimage tours, shared stories about sacred rivers, forests, and mountains, and most importantly, worship of similar deities across the country. I suggest dropping that line altogether.

A second, related point on this passage, is that it does not address a very important part of the later context for the spread of the bhakti movement: the invasion of India by Turkic and Afghan Islamic warlords who destroyed several Hindu temples in Northern and Western India. However, in the interests of avoiding (even more) distracting and lengthy debates and controversies, it is perhaps best to avoid both distractions here; the “progress of Hinduism against caste” narrative as well as the “response to Islamic invasions” narrative.

Suggested Draft:

**Building on their previous study of Hinduism in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, students study the question: How did Hinduism change over time? In the second half of the second millennium, Hinduism witnessed a popular cultural uprising of sorts that went on for several centuries. Known as the Bhakti movement, it began in Southern India and spread to most parts of the country. The Bhakti movement drew on the concept of bhakti, or intense devotion to God, which appear in the Bhagavad Gita and earlier texts, and expressed them as a mass movement consisting of songs, dances, processions, pilgrimages and temple worship. The Bhakti movement was notable for its inclusiveness and emphasis on egalitarianism. It included women, like the famous saint and composer Mirabai (1498-1557). The Bhakti movement, with its emphasis on simple, direct devotion to God by all social classes, led to an outpouring of popular devotional poetry and song in vernacular languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Braj Basha and Hindi. Teachers may suggest to students to listen to songs of the popular American “Kirtan” movement (singers like Krishna Das and Jai Uttal and other singers popular in the American Yoga culture) for a sense of bhakti music and culture. The Hanuman Chalisa, a 40 verse song of praise to Hanuman composed by the Braj-Basha poet Tulasidas (1532-1653) is a good example of Bhakti poetry that has been popularized recently in the West by Krishna Das and others.**

References:

Vishwa Adluri & Joydeep Bagchi (2014). *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology*. New York: OUP.